A brief history of St. Catharine Parish

1930s -- 1940s

St. Catharine Parish was created in 1931 on what was then the far east side of Columbus. On May 12, Bishop James J. Hartley, who presided over the diocese from 1904 until his death in 1944, purchased 11.863 acres east of Gould Road, between Fair Avenue and Bexley Park Road. The new parish would draw from the existing parishes of St. Thomas to the north and Holy Rosary to the west.

Chosen as the new parish's patron saint was St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), a devout Italian nun who claimed to have visions of Jesus, Mary and guardian angels from the age of 6. Catherine entered a cloistered convent at 16 and later emerged to become an influential emissary to the Pope during a time of internal turmoil in the Church. The Papal See was moved to Avignon, France, and for a time rival popes sat in France and Italy. For years, Catherine struggled to restore the papacy to Rome during what has been called the Great Western Schism. On a journey to Rome, frail health led to her death at 33.

Catherine's writings are considered classics of the Italian language. Along with the letters and fervent prayers that have survived, one of her lasting contributions is *Dialogue,* a book written in the form of a conversation between God and her soul. Catherine was canonized in 1461, and in 1970 Pope Paul VI declared her a Doctor of the Church, a person responsible for essential theological teachings. She is the patron saint of the papacy, and her feast day is celebrated on April 29, the date of her death.

Why St. Catherine as the patron saint of the new Columbus parish? A possible connection is that Bishop Hartley celebrated his first Mass in Rome at the tomb of St. Catherine.

After acquiring the land, the bishop authorized construction of a wooden church and attached classrooms, intending them as a temporary measure to launch the parish during the years of the Great Depression.

The chapel, with three altars, and a four-room school were built at a cost of $16,000 on the south-west corner of the property. Only four months after the land was purchased, the new facilities were dedicated by Bishop Hartley on Sept. 13, 1931. Above the main altar stood a nearly life-sized statue of St. Catherine.

Bishop Hartley appointed his secretary, Rev. Robert F. Coburn, as St. Catharine's first pastor. Father Coburn, a native of Steubenville, O., continued to serve as secretary-chancellor for the diocese during his early years at St. Catharine, held other diocesan positions and was elevated to Monsignor in 1946.

When the parish began, land to the east was mostly undeveloped fields for miles. The roads around the property were still dirt, as were many of the streets in nearby Bexley. Sidewalks were still years away. The first parish rolls consisted of 491 parishioners in approximately 100 families.

From the earliest years, the necessary work of maintaining the altar linens and flowers was assumed by the volunteer women of the Altar Society who also raised funds for vestments, cruets, candles and other essentials through socials and card parties.

Except for brief periods, the society functioned in various forms for five decades, expanding into the Altar-Rosary Society in the early 1950s and extending its charitable activities. In 1961, the society pledged the funds that paid for the main altar in the new church.

Soon after opening, the school was nicknamed the Pasteboard Palace. The first enrollment numbered 66 students in grades 1 to 6; grades 7 and 8 were added the following year. From the first day of school, classes were taught by sisters of the Holy Cross, an order primarily devoted to nursing and based in Columbus at Mt. Carmel Hospital.

The parish grew steadily during the 1930s. In 1938, a wing with two additional classrooms was added to the school, and a convent was erected on the northwest corner to provide living area for 10 Holy Cross nuns, who had commuted from Mt. Carmel each day during the school's first years. Until the permanent school was completed, the convent's basement served as the school cafeteria and parish meeting hall.

Athletics were an early feature of the school, primarily boys' football, which began in the 1930s. The school won its first city championship in 1941, but the unlevel field that covered the eastern portion of the parish grounds wasn't conducive to practice or competition.

That changed in the early '40s, thanks largely to the Bexo Club, a non-denominational volunteer organization of parishioners and friends devoted to improving the parish's athletic program. Club members weeded the field, removed a large tree, improved the drainage, leveled the surface and eventually laid out the first baseball diamond and football field.

The pastor dedicated the athletic field on Aug. 25, 1945. Yet, despite its success, the Bexo Club virtually vanished shortly after. A theory holds that Msgr. Coburn, who had been appointed to organize Holy Name Societies in the diocese, thought the club's activities would conflict with the society at St. Catharine.

Girls athletics began in the late '40s. By then, basketball, swimming and track and field teams were actively competing. With the post-war building boom underway and the charter members of the baby boom reaching school age, St. Catharine stepped forward to complete Bishop Hartley's original vision and build a permanent church and school.

1950s -- 1960s

The school came first. Ground was broken on April 24, 1949, for the brick building on Fair Avenue, facing Broadleigh Road. Constructed at a cost of $400,000, it had eight classrooms, a library, a cafeteria, meeting rooms and a combined auditorium-gymnasium. When Bishop Michael J. Ready, Bishop Hartley's successor, dedicated the school on Sept. 17, 1950, enrollment was 307, and the parish, benefiting from new housing in the Eastmoor area, had grown to 700 families.

Msgr. Coburn had been the only pastor, a responsibility that consumed all but nine years of his life as a priest. Health issues soon curtailed his many activities, and he was forced to take a leave of absence in 1950. He returned to his

duties but suffered a heart attack in 1956 and died on March 15.

His successor was Msgr. Joseph R. Casey, a Zanesville, O., native who had grown up in Cleveland and was known for his charming, self-deprecating wit. Among his quips at his farewell dinner in 1970, Msgr. Casey called Bishop Hartley "the most even-tempered man I have ever met: He was always mad.''

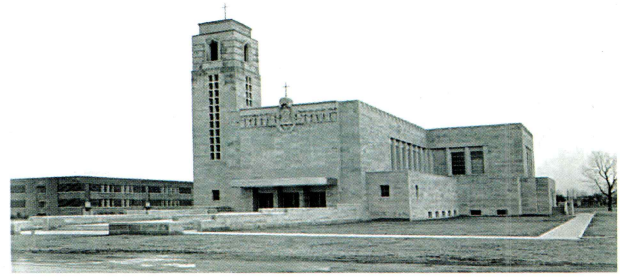
Msgr. Casey would need humor in his new assignment: Within two years of his arrival, plans were drawn up to finally build a permanent church for St. Catharine Parish. Before construction began, six additional classrooms -- two on each floor and two in the basement -- were added to the school in 1959.

The original plans for the permanent church suggested a $1-million project. Bishop Clarence G. Issenmann, Bishop Ready's successor, cautioned about creating such a financial burden for the parish and instructed Msgr. Casey to "effect a reduction in cost'' with the architect and contractor. By March, 1960, plans were approved for a church to cost a guaranteed figure of $780,839.

Ground was broken on April 3, 1960. The building was constructed of St. Meinrad sandstone, trimmed with Indiana limestone.
It was designed in the shape of a cross, with a seating capacity of 900 and seating on all four sides of the main altar.

The altar marble came from Italy; the wood for the Stations of the Cross was carved in Germany. A radiant heating system eliminated the need for radiators.

The cornerstone was laid on Sept. 10, 1961, and the first Mass was celebrated at midnight on Christmas. The formal dedication by Bishop Issenmann followed on Feb. 4, 1962. At the time the new church opened, the parish consisted of 979 families, with average Sunday attendance of 2,794.



Though it had taken 30 years to fulfill Bishop Hartley's original plans for St. Catharine, the finished church stood where he had envisioned it: midway between Fair Avenue and Bexley Park, facing Brentwood Avenue to the west.

The new church and school made the Pasteboard Palace expendable. The old classrooms and the chapel that had performed "temporary'' duty for 30 years were razed in October, 1963. The wing that had served as an office, however, was preserved and moved to a concrete slab to be attached to the new rectory. The area where the church had stood became a parking lot. Gould Road was widened, and sidewalks were added.

By the mid-'60s, total attendance at the six Sunday masses had averaged 3,300. More than 1,000 families lived in the parish, and school enrollment peaked in the 1962-63 school year at 540.

The parish expanded its outreach work in 1965 with the founding of its chapter of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. The international organization of lay persons, founded in 1933, is devoted to administering programs of charity and aid "that alleviate suffering and promote the dignity and integrity of mankind,'' regardless of creed.

1970s -- 1980s

In almost 40 years, only two pastors had presided over St. Catharine Parish, aided by several assistants, and by Rev. Paul J. Bernier, who administered the parish during Msgr. Coburn's leave of absence for health reasons in

1950-51.

That longevity was interrupted in the '70s. Due to poor health, Msgr. Casey took a leave of absence in 1970, then announced his retirement five months later. He was succeeded by Rev. John J. Soltis, a native of McConnelsville, Pa., who had grown up in Steubenville, O. He served four years, during which much of the parish's debt was paid off, and later served as chaplain at the London Correctional Institute.

Father Soltis' successor was Rev. William T. Rardin, a Chillicothe, O., native, who was at St. Catharine only three years until his death on July 2, 1978, at St. Anthony's Hospital. A highlight of Father Rardin's brief tenure was the 1975 announcement that St. Catharine was officially debt-free.

A major change occurred in 1974 when the end of the school year marked the end of the teaching services of the Holy Cross sisters. The withdrawal was necessitated by a decline in personnel, due to aging and fewer new vocations.

Lay teachers had been part of the school's faculty since 1952; now they composed the entire staff. In 1972, Ellen Brosmer became the first lay principal.

The slowdown in the post-war baby boom resulted in decreasing enrollments in the 1970s, bottoming out at 196 students in 1973-74, the smallest since the end of World War II. Enrollment slowly increased in the following years, reaching 250 in 1980 and leveling off at around 280 by the end of the century.

A major plus was the founding in 1972 of the Home-School Association, a new version of the Parent-Teachers Association that had started in 1946 but was inactive by the early '70s. Like the PTA, the Home-School Association raised funds for school improvements and athletic programs through parish activities.

One of the group's most debated endeavors was to introduce Bingo games in November, 1974. Weekly Bingo evenings were first held in the school cafeteria, then in the gymnasium, and finally in the church undercroft after it was completed in 1979.

Bingo was a tough sell in the first year, but by 1980, it had become profitable, netting $51,000 that year. By the early 2000s, that figure had jumped to $190,000 a year -- mostly new money from outside the parish.

Along with constantly replacing used desks and equipment, the Home-School Association has helped the school stay current in the information age by purchasing new computers for the use of the students.

Major changes throughout the parish came under the administration of Father Rardin's successor, Rev. Anthony Borrelli, who was appointed pastor in August, 1978. Father Borrelli was born in Italy and had an extensive education, including six years at the Josephinum Pontifical College in Worthington. He had been serving as chaplain at St. Anthony's Hospital when he became St. Catharine's fifth pastor.

One of his first efforts involved reviving the Altar-Rosary Society, whose membership had declined in the late 1960s as more women began working outside the home. By the early '70s, it had evolved into the Women's Club but was made inactive by Father Soltis in 1973. Father Borrelli re-started the Women's Club in 1978, and it functioned for several more years, though it is inactive today.

The parish celebrated a landmark during Father Borrelli's tenure: its 50th anniversary in 1981. The Catholic Church had experienced profound changes over that half-century, especially since the Vatican II Council in the 1960s. The language of the Mass changed to English; lay ministers and lectors became part of the service; and a Parish Council was established to administer major changes.

Among the projects marking St. Catharine's golden anniversary was the compilation and publishing of a major book about the parish, its priests and its parishioners, including interviews with many members of the parish's first families. The 90-page volume was researched by volunteers and principally written by the late

Tom Keys, a parishioner, reporter for the *Columbus Citizen* and sports editor of the *Columbus Citizen-Journal.* That book is the primary source for this history.

The major construction of the early '80s was the Parish Administration Center to the south of the church. The building contains living quarters for the priests, offices, meeting rooms and the Coburn Library, named for the parish's first pastor.

Succeeding Father Borrelli as St. Catharine's sixth pastor in 1988 was Rev. David V. Sorohan, a native of New Lexington, O., who previously was pastor of St. Peter Parish in Worthington. Much of his experience had been in the diocesan school system as the principal of St. Francis De Sales High School and as superintendent and vicar of schools for the diocese's 23 counties. He was later elevated to Monsignor, as was Father Borrelli.

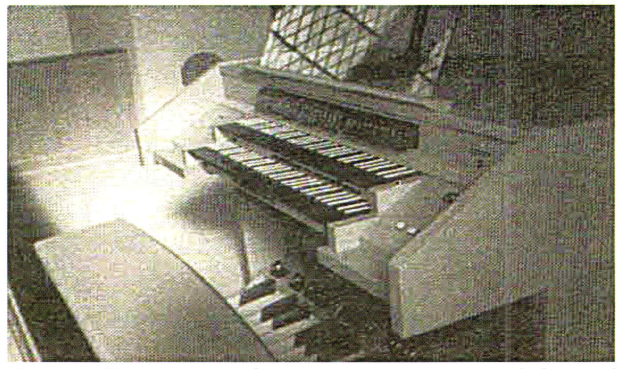
1990s -- 2000s

As Msgr. Sorohan guided St, Catharine toward a new century, he initiated major and minor improvements in the facilities. Both the school and church received new roofs; the gym floor and locker room were renovated, and the church's heating and cooling systems were upgraded. The annual FunFest on the first weekend in June began in 1993 and has grown into a popular three-day event with food, rides, games, entertainment, talent shows and auctions, silent and otherwise.

Three major additions to the church commanded attention.

First came the organ. The design of the church had allowed space for a full organ, but the budget couldn't afford it. Early photos of the main altar show organ pipes in the walls behind, but those were strictly decoration. Years later, a reed organ with speakers was brought in by Father Rardin, but, as Msgr. Sorohan remembers, "Certain notes wouldn't play."

Beginning in 1993, St. Catharine set about procuring a first-class organ. The loft was renovated, and a Casavant organ, built to the church's specifications, was installed.



On April 17, 1994, its completion was celebrated with a dedication and recital by renowned organist Michael Murray. As in many other cases, parishioner contributions helped finance it.

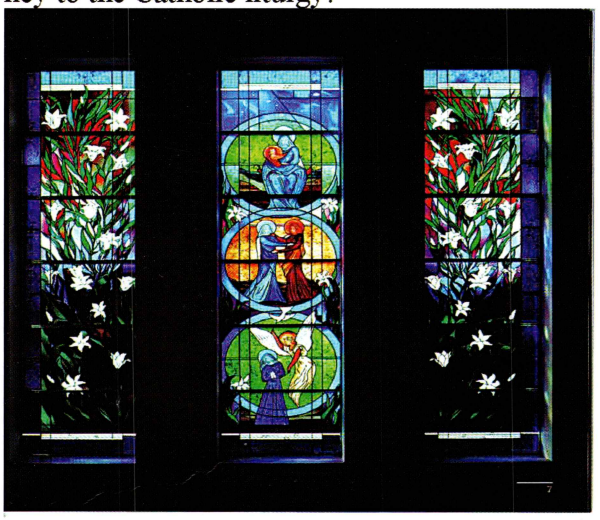
Next came an elevator in 1999. It was added to the north-eastern corner of the church for the use of elderly and disabled visitors. To accommodate the elevator, an external addition had to be built, seamlessly blending it with the 38-year-old church exterior. The elevator provides access for all parishioners to the church's undercroft, the site of many parish activities.

The third major undertaking during Msgr. Sorohan's tenure was the replacement of the church's stained glass windows. No doubt as a cost-saving measure, the original church windows contained simple colored diamonds which might generously be called "generic" and far from inspirational.

Msgr. Sorohan credits parishioner William Case with approaching him in 1999 with a proposed bequeath of traditional liturgical windows as a memorial to his wife, Josephine Case. That began a five-year process during which a committee investigated modern techniques in stained glass art and chose Toronto-based artist Sarah Hall, known for innovative techniques in stained glass, to design and supervise the creation of 33 major windows, as well as smaller windows flanking the side

altars.

The first new windows installed in November, 2001, were the nine located in the south transept, the north transept and the east wall. The center window in each group depicts specific incidents key to the Catholic liturgy:



the Nativity to the south, the Passion to the north and the Resurrection to the east. Each is flanked by symbolic floral designs.

The second phase of the project, completed in March, 2003, involved the installation of 12 windows on the side walls of the transepts and the eastern portion of the church. The eight windows in the north and south transepts meditate on the eight Beatitudes contained in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, as represented by Celtic knots, backed by a satellite-generated map of the stars on the eve of the millennium. The four windows in the east wing represent the Seven Sacraments through illustrations from Christ's life.

The final phase of the project was the installation in March, 2004, of 12 windows in the nave of the church. Each is a portrait and commemoration of a Doctor of the Church, including the parish's patron, St. Catharine of Siena.

Other additions to the parish grounds are a rosary garden to the west of the school (largely a school project) and the Assumption Grotto behind the office. Both provide quiet outdoor areas for prayerful contemplation.

One mystery remains: The Missing S. When the school was built, large metal letters high above the main entrance read: ST CATHARINES SCHOOL.

With his scholastic background, Msgr. Sorohan deemed the lettering ungrammatical because there was no apostrophe between the E and the S. Besides, he argued, St. Catharine doesn't exactly own the school.

So, sometime in the late 1990s, he and the principal, Janet Weisner, agreed to have the offending S removed from the wall. As a result, a gap remains between CATHARINE and SCHOOL. Msgr. Sorohan says the removed S was unceremoniously "discarded."

At 70, Msgr. Sorohan announced his retirement, effective in the summer of 2004, ending a 16-year assignment at St. Catharine. His successor, the parish's seventh pastor, is Rev. Richard Weyls, a native of Lakewood, O., and most recently the pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Columbus' Short North area. Father Weyls came to the priesthood well into his adult life, after a career selling life insurance. Now, he says, he has switched to the business of "afterlife insurance."

As Father Weyls assumes his duties, St. Catharine Parish is, in Msgr. Sorohan's words, "in great financial shape." The parish rolls have stayed steady over the previous 16 years at around 1,250 families, and school enrollment is around 280.

On the horizon for the parish and its new pastor is the celebration in 2006 of St. Catharine's 75th anniversary. It looms as a major opportunity for the members of the parish to celebrate its history, the dedication of the clergy that have served it and the generosity and skill of thousands of volunteers who have made it a spiritual, educational and social force for three-quarters of a century.

June, 2004